

# Getting 'new eyes' at DGMC

## To see or not to see, that's the operation

Not everyone is a candidate for PRK or any laser eye surgery. Patients have been turned away for various reasons; safety is a big factor in any surgical procedure. PRK can correct refractive errors including nearsightedness, farsightedness and astigmatism.



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The War Fighter's Laser Refractive Center at David Grant Medical Center has helped more than 170 volunteer patients see better since they first opened their doors Jan. 22. The Laser Refractive Center at Travis is one of only five Air Force-wide that currently perform PRK, photo-refractive keratectomy, a corrective eye surgery procedure that fundamentally changes the shape of the eye's cornea, improving the way light is focused or "refracted" by the eye.

The Air Force has approved PRK for its personnel; it is an FDA-approved, elective procedure designed to reduce the need for corrective lenses. At DGMC, the laser eye surgery is currently only open to active-duty personnel who fall within certain parameters of vision, retainability and age, among others.

The U.S. Air Force "Warfighter" photo-refractive keratectomy program began with a force readiness concept in mind. The use of corrective lenses — glasses or contacts — can be an operational disadvantage. According to Lt. Gen. Paul K. Carlton, Jr., Surgeon General of the Air Force, PRK is designed to enhance performance and safety in military duties. PRK is not a medical benefit, and there is no require-

ment for any member to obtain PRK.

On the outside, PRK could cost on average \$1500 to \$2000. However, it is offered free by the Air Force to active-duty members who qualify. Squadron commander permission is required and follow-up visits are necessary, said Lt. Col. Dianne Harris, one of DGMC's PRK surgeons and chief of Ophthalmology. The Air Force prioritizes its patients based on the condition of the individual's eyes and upon the operational impact of corrective lenses in the performance of military duties.

PRK referral and treatment process packets are available at the Optometry Clinic and the laser eye center, both located in DGMC. Criteria are outlined in this package. Candidates have been turned away; some patients would be better suited for other types of corrective eye surgery or do not qualify at all. "You only have two eyes, and we're very careful about whom we select for patients here," said Harris. "Our success rate thus far is virtually 100 percent. Patients will experience some vision aberrations until their eyes become used to their 'new eyes.'"

Harris explained changing the way light is refracted in the eye by changing the shape of the cornea is a fairly simple process. "We perform surgeries right now on Mondays, and usually fit in about eight patients," she said. "Ultraviolet light

and high energy pulses, lasting only billionths of a second, disrupt the molecular bonds between the corneal cells. No incisions are made."

In most cases, Harris said, PRK is performed as an outpatient procedure. The laser sculpts the cornea in less than 60 seconds and the patient is usually out of the surgical suite in less than 30 minutes.

Senior Master Sgt. Joe Schieda, Fifteenth Air Force's analysis branch chief, who elected to have PRK done a few weeks ago, explained he had been wearing glasses for decades and was tired of it. "It (glasses) inhibits your activities, including running, swimming, scuba diving, golfing ... and those days where your glasses fog up when it's cold out or dripping from the rain ... Those who wear glasses know exactly what I'm talking about. I did internet research on PRK, read a lot; it helped make me more comfortable with making a decision with something as important as my eyes. PRK has been around for more than a decade and is the preferred choice of corrective surgery it seems in Europe and in Canada."

Senior Master Sgt. David Sewell, Fifteenth Air Force weapons system manager, said, "I planned on doing this (PRK) after retiring. I've worn glasses since third grade. You can't beat the price. PRK requires patience through the eye's healing process; you don't immediately have perfect vision, and healing rates vary. This is a great benefit, especially to those who work on the flight line, those in deployed conditions, heat, cold or combat situations... I'm looking forward to my vision getting better and better. It's worth it; I'd definitely do it again."

Command Chief Master Sgt. Dan Johnson, 60th Air Mobility Wing, said for him it was a quality-of-life issue. "I had been wearing glasses and contacts for about three decades," he said. "I jumped at the opportunity to have PRK. I've had it done for a couple of months now, and it definitely has improved my quality-of-life. I was a bit hesitant as I saw them put the whirling little brush in my eye to take off some of the cornea layer and was a bit apprehensive when I knew the laser was going to burn some of the tissue in my eye to correct it, but I kept the end in mind. I bagged all the glasses I owned and donated them back to the laser refractive center. That was a happy moment."

First Lt. Nikki Hammond, executive officer for the 60th AMW director of staff, said the first couple of days after the PRK procedure, there is a good degree of discomfort. "I kept wondering what I had done to myself," she said. In the end, when they took off the protective contact lenses, she was excited about being able to see the alarm clock when she woke up in the morning without searching for her glasses. "I took my glasses, broke them into pieces with my husband, and threw them in the fireplace. I love being able to see anytime, anyplace. I'd definitely recommend this to anyone who asked!"

Senior Master Sgt. Keith Harris, Fifteenth Air Force traffic management superintendent, the third patient to have PRK at DGMC in January, is loving his new vision eight months after the surgery. "I wore glasses and contacts for 25 years, and my vision was about 20/600 without glasses," he said. "My last pair of glasses sits on my night stand next to my bed, reminding me of what life with glasses used to be like ... including the age-old search in the middle of the night when you have to get to the bathroom! Now, I don't even worry about that anymore."

For more information on PRK at DGMC, call the Laser Center at 423-3146/3166.



(Left), The War Fighter's Laser Refractive Center at David Grant Medical Center uses excimer lasers, combining state-of-the-art computer technology with advanced laser precision. The entire PRK procedure takes less than 30 minutes to complete. (Top), First Lieutenant Nikki Hammond, 60th AMW director of staff executive officer, says good-bye to glasses for good after she had PRK surgery in May at DGMC. More than 170 Air Force personnel have had PRK at DGMC since January.